

PASTORAL REFLECTIONS ON SINGLENES AND CELIBACY

A Paper Prepared for the Study Commission on Doctrine (FMCiC)

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October 11, 2016

A Changing Landscape: Singleness and Celibacy in the Canadian Context

In a 2005 study of Canadian social trends, Susan Crompton suggests that Canadian singles, what she calls the “won’t-marrys,” represent a “small but distinct” segment of Canadian Society who face unique social pressures directly related to their single status.¹ She argues that, statistically speaking, *wont-marrys* tend to have fewer socio-economic resources, have a higher likelihood that they will not enter the labor force “because of family responsibilities or illness,” and tend to have a median income 16% lower than that of “will-marrys.”² Added to this, she argues that many single people “feel the sting of condescension, if not outright prejudice” from the broader society because of their singleness, citing news articles that describe how singles are “made to ‘feel like second-class citizen[s]’ by their married acquaintances” or are “excluded from employment benefits because of society’s ‘fetishizing of coupling.’”³

These unique social pressures are likely to become more prominent in Canadian Society as more and more Canadians reject or cease to value traditional marriage. A 2011 Statistics Canada study found that the percentage of Canadians who never married, were divorced or separated, or were widowed has increased from 39.1% in 1981 to 53.6% in 2011.⁴ These findings are especially significant in that, for the first time ever, “there are more people living alone in Canada than there are couples with children.”⁵

As the Church in Canada looks ahead to what ministry in the Canadian context will look like in the coming years, it will be increasingly important to have thought through the unique ministry

¹ Susan Crompton, “Always the Bridesmaid: People Who Don’t Expect to Marry,” *Canadian Social Trends*, 77, Summer 2005, accessed October 11, 2016, http://www.ghcisocialscience.com/uploads/1/3/5/9/13590293/no_marriage.pdf.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴ Statistics Canada, “Marital Status: Overview, 2011,” accessed October 11, 2016, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91-209-x/2013001/article/11788-eng.htm>

⁵ CBC News, “Census Shows New Face of the Canadian Family,” September 9, 2012, accessed October 11, 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/census-shows-new-face-of-the-canadian-family-1.1137083>.

challenges and opportunities this changing landscape represents. In particular, it will mean addressing pastorally and theologically the distinct pressures that Christian singles face as they seek to live their lives as followers of Jesus in church contexts that tend to idealize marriage as the highest expression of Christian discipleship, and in a world that tends to see traditional marriage as increasingly irrelevant.

An Ethical Imperative: Celibacy and Same-Sex Attraction

This issue is doubly important for churches that, like the Free Methodist Church in Canada, adhere to a conservative biblical sexual ethic when it comes to same-sex marriage and homosexual intimacy. One of the corollaries of the Free Methodist statement that sexual intimacy is “a gift from God reserved for marriage between one man and one woman,” and that “same-sex sexual intimacy is ... a distortion of God’s creation design”⁶ is that for Christians who experience same-sex attraction and still wish to live in accordance with this understanding of the scriptures, celibacy becomes one of the few lifestyle options available.⁷ A church that holds to this view of homosexuality has an ethical imperative to have thought through the issues related to singleness and celibacy, to strive to be a community that is fully inclusive of singles, and to make pastoral and/or theological resources available to help singles pursue celibacy as a meaningful expression of their sexuality.

Justin Lee, the founder and executive director of The Gay Christian Network (GCN) argues that whether a church is affirming of same-sex sexual intimacy or not, every church needs to make celibacy a viable option in their community.⁸ He points out the failing of conservative churches in this regard. “Because most churches currently teach that gay sex is contrary to God’s will, we’d expect that at least *those* churches would support their gay members in living a celibate life. In practice, unfortunately, that is usually not the case.”⁹ He quotes a celibate gay Christian woman who says, “My experience with a lot of churches is that they will say, ‘Gay people should be celibate,’ but then leave you out in the cold to figure out what that means.”¹⁰ Christian Sociologist Jenell Paris-Williams makes a similar point, arguing that the church fails gay Christians if it does not make celibacy a “plausible” option. She argues that the extent to which one’s community presents a lifestyle choice as “plausible” greatly influences the

⁶ *The Manual of the Free Methodist Church in Canada*, Chapter 6, 15.

⁷ Two other options are so-called “ex-gay therapies” and/or entering into a heterosexual union despite one’s same-sex attractions, though both of these options are highly problematic, fraught with difficulties, and lie beyond the scope of this paper to examine sufficiently.

⁸ Justin Lee, *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gay vs. Christians Debate* (New York: Jericho Books, 2012), 237.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

likelihood one will choose it, and be successful in pursuing it. To the degree that the church has an ethical imperative to make celibacy a “plausible” option for single Christians, homosexual and heterosexual alike, Paris-William’s comments bear extended reference:

Celibacy is surely a strenuous spiritual path, but today the cost of celibacy is unreasonably and unnecessarily high. When it comes to moral teachings about sex outside of marriage, we isolate sexual pleasure from all the other good things that are connected to sexual relationships. People are commanded to abstain from sexual intimacy, but no one addresses how abstinence may also limit the person’s access to family, touch, children, financial stability and so on. It’s hard to be a celibate person in an unchaste church whose broader context is an unchaste society. In striving for moral virtue, the celibate also bears the church’s collective sin of failing, in a highly sexualized social context, to make a counter culture in which celibacy is plausible.¹¹

A Singles-Friendly Community: Making Celibacy a Viable Option

If Jenell Paris Williams is right, and the church’s neglect of this issue amounts to a “collective sin,” then it is crucial for churches to make an honest assessment of the degree to which they present celibacy as a viable option, and to take steps towards becoming a more inclusive, singles-affirming community. Many Christian voices, single and married alike, have spoken out informally about the way the church leaves singles feeling isolated, ostracized or “second-class,” through its predominant focus on marriage and family, its unspoken prejudice against singleness, and its tendency to offer “demographic-specific” ministries (i.e. couples ministry, youth ministry, singles ministry, etc.). Debra Fileta, a professional counselor and author, is indicative of such voices. Speaking from personal experience she identifies six ways in which the church can inadvertently alienate singles and unintentionally present celibacy as an unviable option. In her opinion, this happens especially when:

1. Singleness is seen as a problem to be “fixed” rather than a stage of life to be savored.
2. The community tends to cater to married couples and families.
3. Teaching topics revolve around those who are married or parenting.
4. The church tends to highlight singleness as an issue for youth group but neglects to address singles in their 20s, 30s, 40s and beyond.
5. Churches naively equate simply “having a singles group” with having a genuine heart for singles.

¹¹ Jenell Paris Williams, *The End of Sexuality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 136.

6. Marriage is talked about as the reflection of God's love in a way that leaves singles wondering if they're somehow missing part of that love.¹²

In a similar way, author Sarah Thebarg lists seven reasons it is hard to be single in the church; they include the fact that:

1. Teaching around singleness often characterizes it as "the gift of singleness" which gives the impression that singleness is a divine calling and those who do not have it are supposed to get married.
2. Christian views of marriage tend to idealize it as an end in itself and fail to view it in light of eternity where, "Jesus says, 'they neither give nor are given in marriage.'"
3. Marriage is treated as a benchmark for maturity and adulthood (with the unfortunate corollary that single people are often disqualified from ministry positions because they are not married).
4. There are more resources to support marriage and family than singles.
5. The teaching of 1 Corinthians 7:7-9 that "it is good to stay unmarried" is never acknowledged.
6. Singles are viewed one-dimensionally as "the worker bees in the church," assigned to childcare or other narrow ministry roles that overlook or disregard their gifting and calling.
7. Single people are not discipled in their singleness. In a pointed comment she observes, "I have never, not even once, been encouraged to persevere in my singleness because I could do something with it that I couldn't otherwise do for God."¹³

While writers like Thebarg and Fileta are speaking anecdotally, their views are borne out by the research. Albert Hsu, for instance, describes the implicit, and sometimes explicit expectations placed on singles in the church that they will be married or will get married at some point in life, and the clear focus on family and children that makes singles feel they are out of place.¹⁴

¹² Debra Fileta, "Dear Church: Singleness is not a Problem to be Fixed," *True Love Dates* (blog), May 28, 2015, accessed October 11, 2016, <http://truelovedates.com/does-the-church-embrace-singleness>.

¹³ Sarah Thebarg, "7 Reasons Why It's Hard to Be Single in the Church," *The Sarah Thebarg Blog*, January 1, 2015, accessed October 11, 2016, <http://sarahthebarg.com/2015/01/7-reasons-why-its-hard-to-be-single-in-the-church>.

¹⁴ Albert Hsu, *Singles at the Crossroads* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

Similarly, in her study of Christian singles, Wendy Widder suggests that “singles ... have a nagging sense that they don’t fit into church.”¹⁵

A church that wishes to take seriously both the changing social landscape in Canada, and also the implications of a conservative position on homosexual intimacy—a church that wishes to help all Christians respond to the call of discipleship on their lives, regardless their marital status or sexual orientation—will be serious about addressing these imbalances as they appear in their community. As Misa Mochinaga puts it in her study of adult singleness, “it is time that the church seriously evaluates its own view of singles and allows Scripture to inform and correct any assumptions that are not aligned with ... biblical truth. This will be the first step in becoming a church that welcomes people from all spheres and stages of life, young and old, married and single.”¹⁶

It should be stressed that this goes beyond simply providing some singles-focused ministries, a singles small-group, or a bible study. What is needed especially is a church culture that provides meaningful, authentic friendships and deep relationships marked by emotional vulnerability—a church that genuinely provides for the celibate Christian the kind of emotional connectedness and intimacy and practical life-help that they are foregoing by choosing to live a celibate life. Wesley Hill, a celibate gay Christian, has written extensively on this subject. He describes the church as God’s sanctified remedy for human loneliness, as God’s “compensation” to celibate Christians for their sacrifice of sexual intimacy (see Mark 10:29-30). Provocatively, given the evangelical church’s tendency to idealize marriage, he challenges us to recognize that “the New Testament views *the church*—rather than marriage—as the primary place where human love is best expressed and experienced.”¹⁷ Hill is speaking about celibacy as it relates to same-sex attraction specifically, but his observations apply more generally to all kinds of celibate singleness.

A Look at the Scriptures: Three Texts that Speak to Celibacy

There are a number of texts that the church can and should reflect on as it seeks to develop a theology of celibacy and works to nurture a church culture that affirms its plausibility. The first, and most obvious, is 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul addresses the Corinthian church on matters of marriage and celibacy. What stands out in this text is that, contrary to the evangelical idealization of marriage, Paul seems to view marriage here as a good and proper concession to the frailties of our broken sexuality, rather than an arrangement that is somehow superior to

¹⁵ Wendy Widder, *A Match Made in Heaven: How Singles and the Church can Live Happily Ever After* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 27.

¹⁶ Misa Mochinaga, “Christians and Singleness” (paper *Pastoral Counseling in the Ethnic Church Context*, 2016), 3.

¹⁷ Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 111. Italics in original.

singleness. “It is good for a man not to marry,” he writes (7:1), “but because of immoralities (*porneia*, sexual immorality), each man is to have his own wife and each woman is to have her own husband” (7:2). Further on in the passage he will say that it is “good for the unmarried to remain single” (7:8), but if they are likely to “burn with passion” they should marry. Here Paul lines up celibate singleness and marriage as equally legitimate expressions of Christian discipleship, though he is clear that he sees an advantage in singleness. The advantage, specifically, is that unmarried Christians are free to serve the Lord with an undivided heart, whereas married Christians have divided interests (7:33-34). Finally, it should be noted that Paul in this passage refers to celibacy as a “gift.” Given the fact that the term Paul uses here for gift (*charisma*) is the same he will use later to describe the supernatural empowerings of the Holy Spirit—gifts of healing, tongues, prophecy and so on—it should be noted that Paul does not single out singleness as a unique “gift,” as distinct from marriage. Rather he notes that for some the “gift” is to live a married life, for others it is to live a single life (7:6), but both situations are gifts from God and, presumably, require the empowering of the Spirit to live faithfully and well.

Another passage that deserves careful reflection is Jesus’ teaching about “singleness for the sake of the Kingdom of God,” in Matthew 19. After hearing Jesus’ firm position on divorce and remarriage, the disciples respond that, given this view of marriage, it is “better not to marry” (11:10). Given the church’s tendency to see marriage as the ideal expression of the Christian life, Jesus’ response is fascinating, because he does not deny their conclusion. He simply states, with a line of reasoning similar to that of Paul’s in 1 Corinthians 7, that “not all people can accept this statement” (19:11); in other words, because most people cannot successfully embrace the celibate single life, marriage is the viable alternative. He goes on to say, however, that those who are able to “accept” the celibate life should in fact “receive” it, offering a clear and unambiguous affirmation of celibacy as a viable option.

A final text that deserves consideration is Jesus’ teaching about marriage at the resurrection. In an effort to point out apparent inconsistencies in his teaching about the resurrection, the Sadducees ask Jesus about a woman who was married seven times: who will she be married to at the resurrection? Again Jesus’ response is startling for Christians used to assuming that marriage is the highest ideal for the Christian life: “In the resurrection,” he says, “they neither marry nor are they given in marriage” (Matthew 22:29-30). In other words, marriage is an earthly institution that serves a good and useful purpose in this life, but will be unnecessary in the life to come; as biblical scholar John Nolland explains, “Presumably it will still not be good for [people] to be alone [at the resurrection] but the unitive function of marriage will not in the resurrection require the exclusivity that is proper for it in the present age.”¹⁸ This is not to marginalize or trivialize marriage in this present age—the Scriptures are uniformly clear that marriage is a blessing and a gift from God—but it is to put marriage in its proper perspective. Marriage serves an end and is not an end in itself; and celibacy, too serves an end, though it is not an end in itself either. Both are, in their own way, signs of the coming Kingdom where the

¹⁸ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 905.

human arrangements of husband, wife, master, servant and so on, will all be overshadowed by the heavenly relationship of “brother and sister in Christ.”

A church that takes the scripture’s teaching on celibacy seriously will recognize it, celebrate it and affirm it as a distinct and meaningful path for discipleship, one that requires the support of the Christian community (as much as marriages, families and children require the support of the Christian community) if it is to flourish, one that is highly valued and respected in the teachings of the apostles and in the explicit word of the Lord, and one that is a unique and valuable gift to the community, just as much as marriage and families are. Similarly, churches that wish to be shaped by the Scriptures when comes to singleness and celibacy will reject the popular notion that in order to be effective a pastor must be married, or that marriage is a qualification for ministry. This is directly contrary to the plain teaching of the Bible, which, if anything, gives the advantage to the single pastor, who is less encumbered by the demands of a family and a household in the discharge of his or her ministry. At the very least churches that wish to be shaped by the scriptures in this matter will take intentional steps to offer a counter-culture to the highly sexualized culture of contemporary Canadian Society, to be a community where singles are affirmed and supported, and celibacy is embraced as a viable, meaningful path for pursuing the Way of Jesus.

Some Steps Forward: Practical Ideas for Churches

In her paper “Christians and Singleness,” Misa Mochinaga offers a number of practical ideas for churches who want to “embrace singles in meaningful ways.”¹⁹ Among these she identifies the following:

1. Help singles understand that being single is not a curse from God, but a “gift for the present time.”
2. Teach singles not to put their development as individuals on hold until marriage happens, and to recognize that, married or not, “our responsibility is to live fully and engage in God’s work in the world.”
3. Challenge the pervading Christian myths that distort our view of singleness and celibacy. Following Albert Hsu, she cites the following: that God wills some people to be single; that God wants all people to be married; that God has set aside the perfect partner for us; that if God intends for us to be single there is nothing we can do about it.

To these we might add a number of important pastoral considerations as it relates to singleness and celibacy for same-sex attracted Christians specifically. For one, it is imperative to recognize that gay men and women who choose to pursue celibacy as a way of life can face great prejudice

¹⁹ See Mochinaga, “Christians and Singleness,” 3-4.

and suspicion from the broader gay community. As Justin Lee points out, “other gays ... may view ... celibate gays as sitting in judgement of non-celibate gays, and they may worry that promoting celibacy as an option only encourages churches to expect and require it for all gay people.”²⁰ Consequently, “most gay and gay-friendly groups don’t have any tangible place for ... celibate gays.”²¹ Pastoral leaders and counsellors need to recognize and appreciate the unique pressures that a celibate gay Christian faces, and the church generally needs to make special effort to be a supportive and affirming community for men and women in these circumstances.

Another practical step forward is for churches to offer meaningful alternatives to the kinds of relationships celibate gay Christians must give up if they are to follow this path. Wesley Hill has written extensively on the importance of Spiritual Friendship for celibate gay Christians.²² A spiritual friendship is a platonic relationship marked by emotional intimacy, sharing, vulnerability and trust, one that can provide gay men and women the camaraderie, companionship and emotional connectedness that they otherwise would forego in choosing to pursue a path of celibacy. Hill argues that such friendships are essential to making celibacy a plausible lifestyle option. He goes so far as to suggest that churches should explore covenantal liturgies and/or public ceremonies that Christians can use to publically declare and commit to spiritual friendships, calling the church to “[recover] the historic Christian practice of vowed friendships.”²³

A final concrete step churches can take is intentionally and actively to be “extended family” to singles in their midst. Citing Paul’s description in Ephesians of the church as the “household of God,” Albert Hsu discusses at length the role the church can and should play as a kind surrogate family network for singles who may not otherwise have these kinds of connections in their lives.²⁴ Churches where families make an effort to reach out to and invite singles into their homes, churches where older Christians actively mentor single Christians, churches where single adults have the willing support of the community for things like moving or household repairs, churches where single parents have the support of the church community for things like babysitting, churches where singles are invited over especially at family-focused holidays like Christmas or Thanksgiving, churches where singles have loving brothers and sisters in Christ who are ready and willing to share in life’s milestones and grieve life’s disappointments with them—churches that do these kinds of things naturally and spontaneously and well, are churches that get this.

²⁰ Justin Lee, *Torn*, 238.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 241.

²² See Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015).

²³ Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship*, 43.

²⁴ Albert Hsu, *Singles at the Crossroads*, 134.

Conclusion

As the social landscape of Canada continues to change, with more and more people choosing to be single and fewer and fewer people embracing traditional marriage, the church finds itself in a context where a biblical theology of celibacy is crucial, one that will affirm singleness as a viable path for discipleship and generate practical ideas for ministry. This is especially true for churches that adhere to a conservative biblical ethic when it comes to questions of homosexual intimacy; if we are going to hold out celibacy as a primary way for gay Christians to follow Jesus, we must take concrete steps to make this a viable option in our communities. This must start by acknowledging that the Bible never presents singleness as somehow secondary or inferior to marriage, but affirms them both equally as gifts to the church and beautiful ways to follow Jesus in the world. Churches that recognize this will find tangible ways to welcome, embrace and affirm singles in their midst, recognizing and releasing their unique contribution to the life of the community, and supporting them as they follow Jesus in living a celibate life.

Time for a Gut-Check: An Informal Questionnaire for Churches

These questions are not meant to be exhaustive, but they are a starting point for churches who wish to discern if they are presenting celibate singleness as a plausible lifestyle option, or to measure the degree to which they affirm and include Christian singles in their ministries:

1. What percentage of our church households are singles?
2. Do we have any singles in meaningful positions of leadership?
3. Do our practices around Mother's Day or Father's Day exclude or alienate singles?
4. Do we have couple's focused ministries, activities or events that explicitly or implicitly exclude singles?
5. In our discussions of outreach do we explicitly or implicitly specify "families" or "couples" as the preferred demographic?
6. In our vision/values/mission documents, do we explicitly or implicitly state our focus is on families?
7. Do we have singles-focused ministries that "isolate" singles from the broader church community?
8. In our teaching or preaching on Christian marriage, families or sexuality, do we include teaching that presents singleness as a legitimate expression of one's sexuality and/or celebrates it as a meaningful path for discipleship?
9. In our hiring of or searching for pastoral staff, board members or other leaders, do we implicitly or explicitly communicate that single pastors will not be considered?
10. Do we have ceremonies of commissioning to service, or covenant friendships, or other creative ways of publically acknowledging and affirming people's choice to pursue singleness?
11. Do we have single mentors, single pastors, or other single Christian leaders who can help younger singles navigate the unique pressures that are part of a single celibate life?
12. Do we encourage informal and intentional connecting between singles and couples (e.g. do singles get invited over by families and/or couples)?
13. Do we provide DivorceCare, or similar grace-based, biblical ministries to help people deal

with the grief and loss of a divorce?

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